

The Art of Joachim Wtewael

Joachim Wtewael (1566 – 1638) led a life as exceptional and diverse as his art. A masterful storyteller, Wtewael depicted risqué mythological scenes and moralizing biblical stories with equal ease. He was a virtuoso draftsman and a brilliant colorist, adept at working on both monumental canvases and small copperplates. He could paint from the imagination and from life, creating striking portraits of family members and introducing naturalistic still lifes into many of his narrative compositions.

A pillar of his community, Wtewael was active in business, religion, and politics as well as art. He was an ardent Calvinist during a time of religious strife and held various charitable positions. He served on Utrecht's city council and was instrumental in helping establish his local painters' guild. While his paintings were highly esteemed and sought out, he was a successful flax merchant who was not financially dependent on their sale. Many of his paintings, including portraits and

mythological and biblical scenes, remained in his possession and were inherited by family members.

Born and raised in Utrecht, one of the oldest cities in the Netherlands, Wtewael spent four years in Italy and France early in his career. During these study years he embraced the popular international style known as mannerism, characterized by extreme refinement, artifice, and elegant distortion. Throughout his career, Wtewael remained one of the leading proponents of this style, even as most early seventeenth-century Dutch artists shifted to a more naturalistic manner of painting. Wtewael's inventive compositions, teeming with twisting, choreographed figures and saturated with pastels and acidic colors, retained their appeal for his patrons. Yet his strong adherence to mannerism would also lead to the eventual decline of his reputation. This exhibition sheds light on Wtewael's artistic excellence, allowing him to reclaim his rightful place among the great masters of the Dutch Golden Age.

The exhibition is organized by the Centraal Museum Utrecht; the National Gallery of Art, Washington; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.

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PLEASURE AND PIETY

The Art of
Joachim Wtewael

1566 – 1638

Family Portraits



Wtewael painted only a few portraits, and then only of family and close associates, but his ability to capture the likeness and character of a sitter is evident in the five paintings in this room of the artist, his wife, and three of their children. Their elegant clothing and serious demeanor reveal a well-to-do, upstanding family. Wtewael and his wife, Christina, strike similar poses in matching chairs placed at the same angle to the picture plane, reflective of their marital harmony. He holds the tools of his trade, while a Latin motto on a plaque behind him declares that he seeks “Not Glory, but Remembrance.” Christina points to her husband with one hand and grasps a prayer book or Bible with the other; a coin scale on the nearby table suggests her thrifty management of the household.

A palette and paintbrush also identify the older son Peter as an artist. His similarly attired and whiskered brother Johan holds a book opened to a page from the essay “On Fate” by the ancient Roman statesman and orator Cicero; an indication of Johan’s humanist learning, the text postulates philosophical concepts of free will that were paralleled in certain Protestant tenets. The youngest child of the family, Eva, works on a piece of lace with an open Bible on the table beside her, demonstrating that she is both industrious and pious. The portraits of the children are among his latest works and bring Wtewael’s life as a painter to an affectionate and highly personal conclusion. They stayed in the family for generations through descendants of Wtewael’s older daughter Antonetta and her husband, who may have been the models for the nearby shepherdess and shepherd.

Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan



The *Odyssey* of Homer and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid both relate the story of how Vulcan, god of fire, trapped his wife Venus, goddess of love, and Mars, god of war, in bed, exposing their adulterous affair to the merriment of the celestial world. Wtewael delighted in such salacious tales and depicted the amorous couple's predicament in several paintings packed with figures and meticulous details. In each version in the nearby case, Vulcan stands next to the sumptuously appointed bed, twisting his body while clutching the iron net that he had forged to entrap the couple. Among the Olympian deities who gather to watch are Jupiter, holding a bolt of lightning, Saturn, the god of agriculture with his scythe, and the huntress Diana, whose association with the moon is indicated by a golden crescent on her forehead. In defense of his mother, Cupid aims his arrow at the god who pulls away the curtain to reveal the cavorting pair. Cupid's target is either the messenger Mercury, known by his winged hat and serpent-wound caduceus, or the sun god Apollo.

Paintings on Copper



About one-third of Wtewael's extant paintings are on copper, a smooth shiny support that lends them a pronounced luminosity. Paintings on copper were popular in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century and appealed to an elite clientele that valued their refinement and delicacy. Many are no wider than a handspan, yet are rich with figures and precise detail. These small treasures were presumably made to be held and admired close up. Wtewael's talent for executing such meticulous, miniature scenes was recognized by patrons, including Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, who favored paintings on copper and owned one by the artist, most likely *The Golden Age* (no. 22).

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I

Self-Portrait

1601

oil on panel

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,
Purchase 1918

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Christina Wtewael – van Halen

1601

oil on canvas

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,
Purchase 1918

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Peter Wtewael

1628

oil on panel

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,
Bequest 1972

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6

Johan Wtewael

1628

oil on panel

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,
Bequest 1972

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7

Eva Wtewael

1628

oil on panel

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,
Bequest 1972

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Judith with the Head of Holofernes

c. 1595 – 1600

oil on canvas

Princeton University Art Museum,
Museum Purchase, Gift of George L. Craig Jr.,
Class of 1921, and Mrs. Craig

The Death of Procris

c. 1595 – 1600

oil on canvas

Saint Louis Art Museum,
Museum Purchase

Wrongly suspecting her husband Cephalus of being untrue, Procris, daughter of the king of Athens, secretly followed him out on his morning hunt. Hearing the rustling of leaves behind him and thinking it a wild beast, Cephalus turned and hurled his unerring javelin toward the noise, mortally wounding his beloved wife. Wtewael captured the tragic tale, told by the ancient Roman writer Ovid, in an elegantly contrived composition, full of crossing diagonals that poignantly express the trap created by suspicion.

Lot and His Daughters

c. 1597 – 1600

oil on canvas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation through Dan Belin

The biblical patriarch Lot was warned by two angels to take his family and leave the wicked city of Sodom before the Lord destroyed it. Lot took shelter in a cave with his daughters after his wife was turned into a pillar of salt for disobeying the admonition not to look back as they fled. Convinced that no men were left to give them children, the two sisters plied their father with wine and seduced him. Each daughter conceived a son. This painting's fantastic setting and intricately entwined figures epitomize the mannerist style still popular at the end of the sixteenth century.

Perseus and Andromeda

1611

oil on canvas

Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Peintures,
Gift of the Société des Amis du Louvre, 1982

Andromeda, daughter of the king of Ethiopia, stands chained to a rock as she awaits her fate: she is being sacrificed to a sea monster in order to save her land from destruction. Having spotted her and fallen in love, the hero Perseus, son of Jupiter, swoops down on his winged horse Pegasus to slay the beast and win the fair maiden's hand. Wtewael's luminous princess evokes the passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that describes how Perseus nearly mistakes Andromeda for a marble statue, but realizes she is human when her hair flutters in the gentle breeze. Combining playful imagination, elaborate poses, and painstaking naturalism (in, for example, the rendering of the various seashells), this painting is a study in artistic virtuosity.

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A Shepherd

1623

oil on panel

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum,
Melvin R. Seiden Purchase Fund in honor of
William W. Robinson

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37

A Shepherdess

1623

oil on panel

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum,
Melvin R. Seiden Purchase Fund in honor of
William W. Robinson

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Bacchus

1628?

oil on panel

Private collection

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II

The Adoration of the Shepherds

1598

oil on canvas

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,

Purchase with support from
the Vereniging Rembrandt, 1935

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12

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian

1600

oil on canvas

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
Kansas City, Missouri, Purchase,
Nelson Gallery Foundation

According to legend, Sebastian was an officer in the Roman guard who was condemned to death for converting to Christianity. Bound and shot with arrows, he survived and avowed his faith again, only to be clubbed to death. Most artists depicted his body after it was pierced with arrows, but Wtewael chose the moment before the executioners let their weapons fly. The figures' contorted poses and pyramidal arrangement, together with the varied directions of their gazes, create a sense of restlessness that is characteristic of the artist's mannerist style.

The Raising of Lazarus

c. 1600 – 1605

oil on canvas

Stephen Mazoh, Rhinebeck, New York

*Kitchen Scene with the
Parable of the Great Supper*

1605

oil on canvas

Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

This painting is one of several by Wtewael that follow a Dutch tradition of didactically pairing a foreground kitchen scene with a background religious one. Visible in the distance are episodes from the parable of the great supper (Luke 14:16 – 24). Jesus told of a man who prepares a sumptuous banquet to which all the invited guests — making different excuses — decline to come. Outside the archway at left, the man's servant walks the streets to summon in their place the poor, the lame, and the blind. These grateful guests arrive to dine at the table seen through the archway at right. The parable reveals that all who heed the Lord's invitation — even the outcasts of society — will feast in the kingdom of heaven, while those too absorbed by the cares of the world will not.

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The Annunciation to the Shepherds

1606

oil on canvas

Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston

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25

The Annunciation to the Shepherds

c. 1606?

oil on canvas

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In the gospel of Luke (2:8–14), an angel appears to shepherds watching their flock by night and brings glad tidings that a savior, Christ the Lord, has been born. This painting and the one next to it are nearly identical in their illustration of that biblical passage, suggesting that a patron saw Wtewael's original version (probably the one to the left) and commissioned a similar work for himself. Subtle differences exist between the compositions. For example, two reclining shepherds visible beyond the cow's head here do not appear in the other version. Infrared reflectography made during the recent restoration of this canvas reveals that it originally looked more like the adjacent work before Wtewael painted in these extra figures and made other small changes.

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Adam and Eve

c. 1610

oil on copper

Private collection

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34

Woman Selling Vegetables

c. 1618

oil on canvas

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,

Purchase 1918

Illustrating the proverb that one bad apple spoils the barrel, a young girl holds up a rotting piece of fruit picked from the basket of produce. The well-known axiom was interpreted in the Netherlands as a warning to keep bad influences away from susceptible youth.

The Kitchen Maid

c. 1620 – 1625

oil on canvas

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,
Purchase with support from the
Vereniging Rembrandt, 1999

Preoccupied by her task of preparing a feast, the maid here seems unaware of the biblical scene taking place behind her: Christ visiting the house of Martha and Mary. As recounted in the gospel of Luke (10:38 – 42), Mary sits down to listen to Christ preach, leaving her sister Martha to prepare the meal; when Martha complains, he replies that Mary has made the better choice. This moralizing lesson of elevating the spiritual, contemplative life over worldly distractions tempers the almost carnal sensuousness of the foreground scene, where Wtewael's extraordinary talent for depicting objects realistically is on display.

Moses Striking the Rock

1624

oil on panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

After fleeing their bondage in Egypt, the Israelites were thirsty and weary from their long journey wandering through the desert. Moses shared their complaints with God, who commanded that he take the rod that had parted the Red Sea and use it to bring water miraculously out of a rock.

The subject had political overtones in the Netherlands, for the Dutch drew parallels between their decades-long quest for independence from Spain and the Israelites' escape from Egypt. The Dutch likened the first leader of their revolt, William the Silent, Prince of Orange, to Moses—for each died before his people reached the promised land.

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Steven de Witt

1604 – 1610

oil on parchment on panel

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,

Purchase 1948

De Witt was a general from Utrecht who served the Spanish king Philip II. De Witt's son Johannes, a distant relative of the artist, commissioned this portrait some thirty years after his father's death in 1570. Wtewael probably based it on an older painting. The general kneels at a monument that bears his coat of arms and is inscribed in Latin with his name, position, and age. Executed on parchment, this portrait may have been included in a manuscript to celebrate a family patriarch.

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14

The Apulian Shepherd

c. 1600 – 1605

oil on copper

Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection

This painting illustrates a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about a shepherd from the Apulian region of southern Italy who was transformed into an olive tree as punishment for mocking a group of dancing nymphs. Reclining in the foreground of the overgrown glade is the god Pan, who points out the foolish shepherd in the clearing at left. Branches spring from his head as he reaches out in astonishment, too late to take back his insults.

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The Supper at Emmaus

c. 1603 – 1608

oil on copper

Private collection

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27

*The Battle between the Gods
and the Titans*

c. 1610

oil on copper

The Art Institute of Chicago,
Through prior acquisition of the
George F. Harding Fund

The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis

1612

oil on copper

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,
Williamstown, Massachusetts

The romance between Peleus, hero of Thessaly, and the sea nymph Thetis culminated in a great wedding feast attended by all the deities but one—the uninvited Eris, goddess of discord. She nevertheless makes an appearance, flying in to create havoc by dropping a golden apple inscribed “for the fairest,” and thus causing Juno, Venus, and Minerva to compete for that honor. In the far distance to the left of the large tree is the scene that results: the shepherd Paris decides which of the three goddesses will receive the apple. His judgment (the subject of a nearby painting, no. 32) sets in motion the events that will lead to the Trojan War.

The Judgment of Paris

1615

oil on panel

The National Gallery, London,

Bequeathed by Claude Dickason Rotch, 1962

After being promised the love of the most beautiful woman on earth, the shepherd Paris hands Venus the golden apple that anoints her the fairest of the deities. He had been asked to choose between three goddesses, and the other bribes he was offered — power and wealth from Juno (at far left) or wisdom from Minerva (at right) — could not compete with the prospect of love. Helen, already married to the king of Sparta, is Paris' prize, and her abduction triggers the Trojan War.

The Tribute Money

1616

oil on copper

Private collection

The Bible tells of the Pharisees' attempt to entangle Jesus in his own words by asking him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Rome. Expecting him to say no, they hope to hand him over to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, for sedition. Instead, Jesus takes a coin with the effigy of the emperor on it and declares that they should "render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's."

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38

Caritas

1623

oil on panel

Johnny Van Haeften Ltd., London

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that of the three theological virtues — faith, hope, and charity — the greatest is charity. In the visual arts, charity (*caritas*) came to be allegorized as a woman nursing an infant. Here Wtewael emphasized the nurturing love of Caritas, who smiles with benevolence as one wriggling child pulls away from her breast to pet the puppy clambering onto her lap and two toddlers press in close.

[DEX 62]

44

Study for a Salt Cellar

1608

pen and ink with wash and

gouache (partly oxidized) on gray-prepared paper

The British Museum, London

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45

*Adam in the Garden of Eden,
Naming the Animals*

c. 1605 – 1615?

pen and ink with wash and gouache over chalk

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Purchase, 2002 Benefit Fund
and Mrs. Howard J. Barnet Gift, 2003

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50

The Judgment of Paris

c. 1615?

pen and ink with wash over chalk

National Gallery of Art, Washington,
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1990

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51

Venus and Amor

c. 1610s?

pen and ink with wash

Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam

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52

Attributed to Joachim Wtewael

Mercury and Argus

c. 1610s?

pen and ink with wash, squared

National Gallery of Art, Washington,

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1973

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53

*Suffer the Little Children
to Come unto Me*

c. 1621

chalk and gouache on gray-prepared paper

Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase,

Hal H. Smith Fund, 1959

The Wedding of Peleus and Thetis

1622

pen and ink with wash and gouache

Teylers Museum, Haarlem

This drawing is a brilliant expression of the same technical refinement that typifies Wtewael's paintings. The sinuous line, intricate composition, and supple use of ink and gouache to create light and shadow as well as depth and volume are characteristic of the artist's draftsmanship at its best.

Allegory of the Dutch Revolt

(nos. 46 – 49)

An expert draftsman, Wtewael designed a series of twelve painted glass panels for the town hall of Woerden, west of Utrecht. Now lost, the panels are known through the carefully finished drawings he prepared, probably to show the patron for approval and to guide the glass painter in the project. The series depicts the prolonged and bitter struggle for Dutch independence from Spain, beginning with the first stirrings of the conflict in the mid-sixteenth century through the signing of a truce in 1609. The four designs on display here relate events through the allegorical figure of the Dutch Maiden, who personifies the Netherlands.

46

The Dutch Maiden Threatened by the Bishop and the Persecutions

c. 1612

pen and ink with wash and gouache

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,

Purchase 1978

Watching executions in the distance, an anguished Dutch Maiden is menaced by a bishop and a nobleman.

47

The Dutch Maiden Trampled by the Duke of Alba

c. 1612

pen and ink with wash and gouache

Collection Centraal Museum Utrecht,

Purchase 1978

This drawing (like no. 46) conveys the violence and chaos of the time. Captured here is the suffering of the Dutch at the hands of the Duke of Alba, the sixteenth-century Spanish general and governor of the Netherlands notorious for his harsh suppression of the revolt. As the Dutch Maiden cowers beneath his foot, an execution takes place behind them.

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48

The Dutch Maiden *Assisted by Prince Maurits of Orange*

c. 1612

pen and ink with wash and gouache

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Prince Maurits, who led the Dutch forces, reaches out to help the Dutch Maiden to her feet, pointing toward a peaceful townscape in the distance.

49

The Twelve Years' Truce

1612

pen and ink with wash and gouache over chalk

Maida and George Abrams Collection, Boston

Spain, personified as the young woman on the right, is guided by the commander of the Spanish forces to shake the hand of the Dutch Maiden. She stands between Prince Maurits of Orange and the French king, who had helped broker the peace between the Dutch and the Spanish.

18

(left)

The Wedding of Cupid and Psyche

c. 1601 – 1603

oil on copper

The Hearn Family Trust

22

(center, above)

The Golden Age

1605

oil on copper

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase,
The Edward Joseph Gallagher III Memorial Collection,
Edward J. Gallagher Jr. Bequest; Lila Acheson Wallace Gift;
special funds; and Gift of George Blumenthal, Bequest of
Lillian S. Timken, The Collection of Giovanni P. Morosini,
presented by his daughter Giulia, Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Nathaniel Spear Jr., Gift of Mrs. William M. Haupt,
from the collection of Mrs. James B. Haggin,
special funds, gifts, and bequests, by exchange, 1993

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(center, below)

***Without Ceres and Bacchus,
Venus Grows Cold***

c. 1600 – 1605

oil on copper

Private collection

27

(right)

***The Battle between the Gods
and the Titans***

c. 1610

oil on copper

The Art Institute of Chicago,
Through prior acquisition of the George F. Harding Fund

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16

Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan

1601

oil on copper

Mauritshuis, The Hague

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Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan

1604 – 1608

oil on copper

The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

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Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan

1610

oil on copper

Collectie Broere Foundation,

On loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

<p>30</p> <p><i>Perseus and Andromeda</i></p> <p>1611</p> <p>oil on canvas</p> <p>Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Peintures, Gift of the Société des Amis du Louvre, 1982</p> <p>Andromeda, daughter of the king of Ethiopia, stands chained to a rock as she awaits her fate: she is being sacrificed to a sea monster in order to</p>	<p>save her land from destruction. Having spotted her and fallen in love, the hero Perseus, son of Jupiter, swoops down on his winged horse Pegasus to slay the beast and win the fair maiden's hand. Wtewael's luminous princess evokes the passage in Ovid's <i>Metamorphoses</i> that describes how Perseus nearly mistakes Andromeda for a marble statue, but realizes she is human when her hair flutters in the gentle breeze. Combining playful imagination, elaborate poses, and painstaking naturalism (in, for example, the rendering of the various seashells), this painting is a study in artistic virtuosity.</p>
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